

Notes on the Appearance of Balloon Animals

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To the close observer of contemporary architectural practice it is already apparent that balloon animals have arrived on the scene. While the coherence and legitimacy of the phrase “balloon animals” as a designation for a group of related design objects is in part the subject of this essay, suffice to say at the outset that a number of young design practices have been producing small- and medium-scale biomorphic objects (animals) that are roundly tumid (balloons), either by virtue of being inflated or by adopting the predominantly circular cross section of pneumatic objects in some other material. The production of these objects perhaps began with Bittertang’s *Blo Puff* in 2010 [Figure 1], which was quickly followed by followed by Central Standard Office’s *Primitive Postures* (2011) Bittertang’s *Burple Bup* (2011), the LADG’s *48 Characters* (2013) [Figure 2], SIFT & EADO’s *Pup Huddle* (2013) and EADO’s *Peep Peep* (2014) [Figure 3], Central Standard Office’s *Seven Primitive Sins* (2014), and the LADG’s *Corpulence, Accoutrements* (2014).

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1967, LITERALISM, AND THE INANIMATE SUBJECT

What are balloon animals doing here, in architecture? What is it about the effects of balloon animals that make them worthy of extraordinary attention by this group of emerging practitioners? What does a balloon animal do? This essay will argue that what balloon animals do is construct inanimate subjects. Although made of inert matter, they defy certain distinctions between animate viewing subject and inanimate viewed object so that they tend to join their audience instead of being observed by it. This construction of the inanimate subject is made possible by the use of formal tropes cataloged by Michael Fried in his seminal 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood.” Whereas in Fried’s essay these tropes were derided as hallmarks of inferior, theatrical art, recent balloon animal projects in architecture invert Fried’s value system to embrace the work he excoriated. And they go a bit further, exaggerating the effects that were only marginally apparent in the art contemporaneous to the essay. While Fried’s text was perhaps not



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the explicit cause of the balloon animal work cited above, “Art and Objecthood” provides an analytic frame within which the effects of balloon animals can be understood, situating them within architectural discourse near the core of the discipline instead of at its fringe.

To understand the issues at stake, it worth returning to the New York art scene of 1967. By the latter half of the 1960’s it had become apparent that work, primarily painting, championed by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried had reached such a high degree of geometric abstraction that the definition of art was threatened by the possibility of a violent reduction. “Such a possibility began to present itself around 1960” and “was largely the result of developments within modernist painting.”¹ If works like Frank Stella’s *Effingham I*, which is essentially a multi-colored shape on the wall, could qualify as a painting instead of a simple geometric object, then it stood to reason that something even further reduced and completely *literal* could also qualify for this elevated position – a six-foot cube, say. “Art and Objecthood” was the bulwark that Fried attempted to erect against this reduction. On one side of his defensive line were the modernist painters who bore an “imperative to seek to negate objecthood”² and on the other side were the literalists who embraced and sought to “hypostasize objecthood.”³ The damning critique that separated good from bad in this system of division was that literalist art was theatrical. It created a kind of virtual thespian in the gallery, relentlessly performing, demanding the viewer’s attention, and invading the space that ought to properly belong to the audience and not the work of art itself. Literalist art constructed a phantom being or inanimate subject that joined the viewer in the gallery. Fried catalogs of this inanimate subject in an atomized list of formal properties that can be read something like creation Thomas Hobbes Leviathan that is gathered from disparate observations into a being capable of autonomous action greater than the sum of its parts: “this is the generation of that great Leviathan.”⁴

Figure 1: *Burple Bup*, Bittertang Farm



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First, the size of much literalist work, as Morris' remark imply, compares fairly closely with that of the human body...Second, the entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideas of the non-relational, the unitary, and the holistic are other persons...And third, the apparent hollowness of most literalist work – the quality of having an inside – is almost blatantly anthropomorphic. [...] It is, as numerous commentators have remarked approvingly, as though the work in question has an inner, even secret life.⁵

Although Fried writes in a voice that insists on the representational qualities of the work and is antagonistic to literalism (he writes it is “*as though* the work in question has an inner, even secret life” instead of “the work in question has an inner, even secret life”), his list of formal traits can be re-read without this bias as a recipe for the creation of a phantom being: first, a coherence can be separated from its environment, a shape that is identifiable as a body; second, the body is unitary and non-relational – a thing-in-itself instead of a representation of another thing that relies on a pictorial illusion; and third, hollowness provides the animating spark of vitality, enabling the perception of inner life.

Once the inanimate subject of literalist art had been constructed in this way, Fried observed three effects that the literalist work was able to achieve with respect to its audience. First, objects with these formal properties are contemporaneous with their audience in time. The beholder's interest in the object is always here and now, unfolding in the present. “Smith's cube is always of further interest...it is inexhaustible.”⁶ Second, in addition to being contemporaneous with the audience in time, this class of objects is contemporaneous in space. The object occupies the same space as the beholder. “Inasmuch as the literalist work depends on the beholder, it is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for him. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone – which is to say it refuses to stop confronting him....”⁷ Third, the fictitious being constructed by this object joins the audience in space and time. “The

Figure 2: Detail study from *48 Characters*, The LADG



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beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended – and unexpecting – relation as subject to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person.”⁸

And with that, Fried establishes not only a formal basis for the construction of inanimate subjects, but a catalog of the kinds of interactions such a subject might have with a human audience. With this re-reading and re-purposing of Fried’s argument, it becomes possible to detach it from the series of value judgments that the essay was originally written to sustain, beginning with the charge of anthropomorphism. Apparently at the time of the essay’s publication, both Fried and the literalist artists against whom the piece was written agreed that anthropomorphism was an undesirable trait in art. Perhaps the root of these anxieties is better expressed in the natural sciences, where the attribution of human traits to creatures in the natural world ascribed motivations and behaviors to the research subject that might not actually exist. Darwin was prone to this, writing a book comparing “The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.” If the goal, however, is not the discovery of objective truth in a frame of reference outside of human experience, then anthropomorphism can itself become the territory that must be more sensitively and accurately observed. What are the conditions of form most likely to solicit the anthropomorphic error and construct an inanimate subject? Is it possible to change how the inanimate subject is experienced, to give it a precise character? And, further, once the anthropomorphic error has occurred, is it possible to design an object that acquires a degree of autonomy, free to do things that might confound and surprise? At this furthest extreme in the repurposing of Fried’s formal observations to other ends, anthropomorphism evaporates entirely, leaving a potential field of design that first solicits the attribution of life, and then guides as well the behavior of the thing that has been created, or what we might call its “life-effects.”

The negative stigma of theatricality can also be detached. Although not explicitly expressed in Fried’s essay, underneath the accusation of theatricality is a discomfort with the in-authenticity of literalist art. It is not sufficiently itself and is therefore like a thespian playing a role loudly and somewhat badly, both performing a character on stage and providing evidence that she is not in fact that character. A cube that constructs the sense of another person in the room is similarly inauthentic. “Cube” and “sense of another person in the room” are not parallel constructions superimposed on one another; literalist art is not sufficiently itself.

Figure 3: *Peep Peep*, EADO

This is, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of such extreme formal reduction. Any effect at all generated by Tony Smith's *Die* is not properly coincident with the perfect inertness of its platonic form. A cube is not a person; not anything at all except a cube.

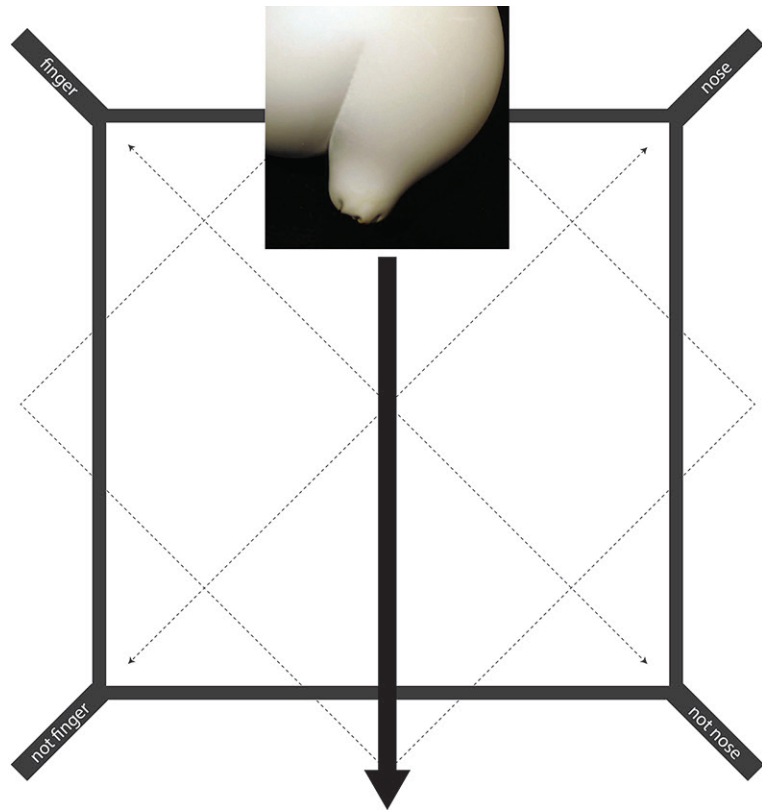
BALLOON ANIMALS

Here, observing with discomfort the inauthenticity of a cube that constructs a person, is a good vantage point for evaluating emergence of balloon animals in contemporary architectural practice. This is the task of balloon animals: to constitute better inanimate subjects; or, put another way to exploit Freud's list more authentically. The violent reduction that makes the *Die* inauthentic provokes a question: can other forms exploit Freud's list authentically? By increasing instead of reducing, is it possible to design inanimate subjects where the effects are parallel and superimposed on the material construction – inanimate subjects that are, so to speak, more themselves? Answering this question in the affirmative is the project of the contemporary architect-designed balloon animal, and an arsenal of tactics has been invented to achieve that "yes."

WILLFUL MATERIAL, ENUMERATION, AND THE FIRST DEFEAT OF REPRESENTATION

Contemporary balloon animal designers have interpreted the "increase" in the above paragraph as an increase in formal complexity. And as formal complexity increases, the first task of the balloon animal designer is to maintain Freud's "unitary, non-relational" character that does not establish pictorial illusion and allows the objects to remain as things-in-themselves. As objects stray from purely platonic territory it becomes more difficult to defeat the representational tendencies that crop up. Things tend to look like other things as they are increasingly formed. Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* is an excellent case study in this regard. It is just slightly more complex than a stack of platonic solids, but it establishes an extremely persuasive representational relationship with a real dog on the basis of enumeration. There are discrete nameable regions – head, legs, snout – and there are the correct quantities of each one of these: one head, four legs, one snout. More generally, enumeration enforces a certain kind of relational imperative that works in a chain: first discreteness of features allow us to establish quantities; and quantities, because they do not belong to a specific thing but to all things, begin an inexorable march toward comparison. Five features in a radial array will be counted and then compared to fingers. Four digits in a similar array will be counted as legs.

In *Balloon Dog*, though, there is a hint of the technical means that can be mobilized to defeat enumeration. At the four-way joint between front legs, neck, and abdomen, the material of the sculpture is twisted a number of times to accomplish the transitions between regions, to pinch off leg and begin abdomen, for instance. Although there is a clearly a stomach and clearly a leg, we only detect them because some kind of action is being exerted on the underlying balloon of which both stomach and leg are composed. In this is the implied threat that the balloon could willfully shrug off the manipulations imposed on it and return to being an unformed sausage. It functions to hold together the whole as much as it functions to separate the body of the balloon into parts. Features, in other words, identifiable regions like stomach and legs, are not coincident with parts. In this way balloon animals can achieve formal complexity while remaining unitary and non-relational wholes.

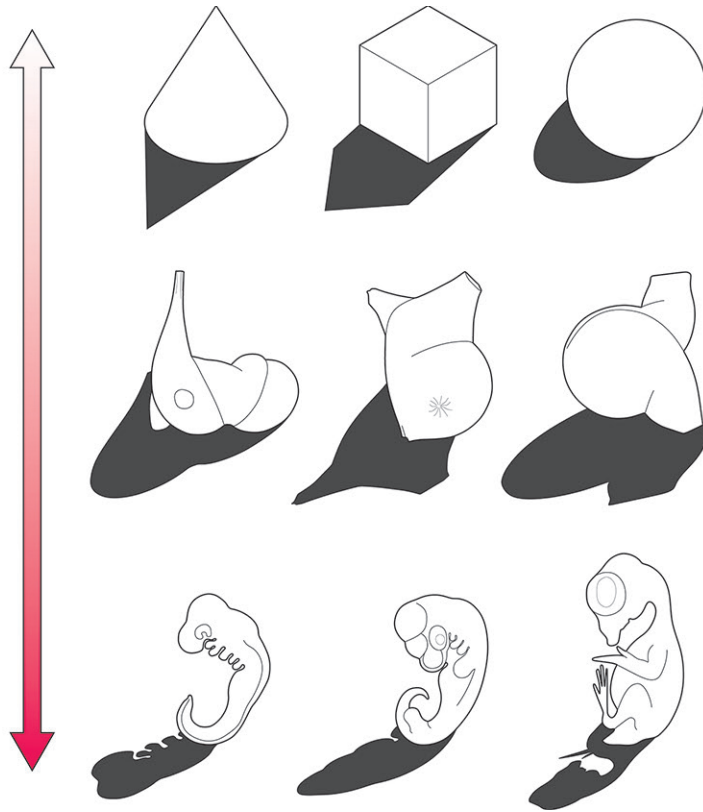


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Contemporary balloon animal designers exploit this relationship between feature and material. LADG's *48 Characters* have identifiable features, but these are formed by indentations in a tumid mass. The indentations themselves are incomplete and do not entirely circumnavigate the body with marks, as though the nature of the underlying material resists complete segmentation. *Peep Peep* uses nubs and protuberances that can be counted, but only at their extremities. At the place where the nub interfaces the body, there is no joint that definitively separates body from nub, only a constriction in the underlying material. The smooth, continuous graduation of this constriction makes it impossible to identify a discrete location of attachment where a nub could be definitively counted as an element. The balloon animals achieve figure without parts and feature without enumeration.

The kinds of features exhibited by the balloon animals can be generally characterized: they are immediately recognizable as features but are not known and nameable body parts. This tendency can be tested in a semiotic square [Figure 4] using a region isolated from one of the balloon animals of *48 Characters*. The feature could be named in generic terms as a kind of protuberance with a set of affiliations to both nose and finger. It is also, though, decidedly not a nose and not a finger. Further, the negative positions on the square do not completely account for it: however indifferent to the better constructions of English grammar, it is not *not* a nose and not *not* a finger. In search of a definitive position on the surface of the square, it tends to travel South and hug the midline of the diagram, suspended equally between nose and finger, also repelled equally by nose and finger. Why, though, is this the case? Perhaps it has something to do with the threat that at any moment, the features might succumb to the threat of the material from which they are formed and collapse back into a state of indistinction. The threat articulated by the material, in other words, exerts a force that propels the

Figure 4: A test of a balloon animal feature in terms of its relative strength of affiliation with fingers and noses.



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feature across the surface of the semiotic square and does not allow it to come to rest at a single location. Just as much as the balloon animals set up the conditions that make them legible as subjects, they display their inanimate, material qualities in equal measure.

EDGE, IDENTITY, AND THE SECOND DEFEAT OF REPRESENTATION

Addressing the problem of enumeration defeats representation at the level of the part. It permits balloon animals to achieve a greater degree of formal complexity while remaining unitary, non-relational wholes that are not involved with pictorial illusion. It does not necessarily, however, defeat representation at the level of the whole. In order to achieve this second defeat, contemporary balloon animals have edges that are designed to resist an immediate gestalt understanding of their shapes. The all-too-familiar *Creation of Adam* from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling is a clear example of this technique. Surveying the boundaries of the figure, it is possible to discern a difference between edge and the limit of the body. Along most of the boundary, edge and the limit of the figure are coincident, but at several regions – the armpit, the knee, the groin, and the lower abdomen – edge also folds to the interior of the figure to describe muscular anatomy. As this happens, the primacy of edge at the boundary of the figure is called into question. It is no longer the sole device capable of establishing the total identity of the figure. There is, in a sense, less Adam and more flesh: folds and creases delay attention in the middle and are not completely coincident with the boundary silhouette. The ability to name the figure in a gestalt flash of understanding also decays as the primacy of the edge at the boundary recedes. It is no longer possible to attribute the figure as a representation of something else in the world; or rather, it is no longer solely possible to call the figure a representation – it retains the possibility of being itself.

Figure 5: A spectrum of articulation from Platonic solids to Embryos in the manner of Ernst Haeckel. Balloon animals reside between these two poles.

Central Stand Office's *Seven Primitive Sins* uses this technique to defeat representation at the level of the entire figure. The tufted, upholstery-esque lumps on the outer surface establish a series of creased edges that continually work from the exterior limit of the figure in toward the middle. When the figure is rotated it retains a gross anatomy of proportion but the interior arrangement shifts subtly with respect to the edge, making it impossible to establish a single, gestalt identity. LADG's *48 Characters* also have creased edges that fold in from the perimeter to the middle of the body, although in a far lower quantity than *Seven Primitive Sins*. Whereas *Sins'* creased edges affect the body at the scale of texture, *48 Characters* creased edges alter the reading of the entire body, producing an entirely different impression of shape from each vantage point.

Although this prying apart of edge and identity is capable of operating at multiple scales and quantities of articulation – as in the comparison of *Sins* and *Characters* – it is important to understand a scalar and quantitative limit within which this property holds and formal articulation works in service of eradicating the representational value of an object. It is possible to locate balloon animals on a spectrum [Figure 5] from platonic solids (which are completely free of articulation and operate at a single, monolithic scale) to embryos in the manner of Ernst Haeckel (which are highly articulated across multiple scales). With platonic solids, edge at the boundary of the object is completely and totally coincident with identity. These edges make it possible to immediately declare sphere, cone, or cube; the solids are eidetic, always representational in the sense that each instantiation of the form aspires to be a drawing of a virtual ideal. With embryos, the properties of edge are reversed. Everywhere, and at all scales the edge folds in from the perimeter with such frequency that a secondary order emerges between edges that controls and stabilizes the perception of the form in known categories – the myriad in-folded edges become nascent wings, beaks, heads, and feet. This secondary order establishes a form of pictorial illusion. Embryos are incipient versions of their future selves. They represent what they are about to become. Balloon animals reside between these two extremes, using the articular of edge within a scalar and quantitative limit so that it is never completely coincident with identity.

HOLLOWNESS

Contemporary balloon animals use hollowness to imply an inner life. By comparison with Fried's observations, the hollowness in this new class of objects is both more varied in the way hollowness is constructed and in the "life effects" that hollowness is able to generate. In "Art and Objecthood" Tony Smith's sculpture is a good example of literalist hollowness. If the piece is indeed hollow, the observer can imagine things inside it. It solicits an imaginative invention from the view. In fact, the demand on imaginative capacity of the viewer is almost total, and does not involve the actual sculpture other than to establish some basic parameter of size. Almost anything might be in there, and most of the inner, secret lives would be fairly garden-variety concealments like locking something inside a safe. When contained in a generic object like a cube, Fried's hollowness as a spark of life is tenuous. It is only the most imaginative viewer who will be able to invent concealed vitality, as though the box itself were a live presence.

Contemporary balloon animals shift the burden of imaginative invention somewhat, back to the object itself. It is not possible to imagine *anything* inside them, but rather a very specific range of innards that promote the construction of an

inanimate subject. Parts of *Blo-Puff* are made of transparent, inflated plastic, and the audience doesn't have to engage in much speculation to conclude that it is full of air. Here, hollowness is not about imaging the diverse range of things inside, but the implication of a breath after-effect: hollowness is the period just after an evacuated breath or sharp inhalation that might be needed to fill the balloon. We don't imagine what's inside *Blo-Puff* as much as we are convinced by its hollowness that an action has taken place or is about to take place. Hollowness produces a systole and diastole of expectation. *Pup Huddle* uses an opposite form of hollowness, completely concealing the interior in a dense application of bristly hair. This treatment introduces a further refinement to the idea of hollowness. Because it is covered in hair, the observer knows that something must be inside, underneath the bristles. This something, though, is invisible, and it is not possible to determine. The separation of interior and exterior in this way, so that the materiality of the exterior implies a thing underneath but does not reveal the properties of that thing could be called "phenomenal hollowness" in contrast to the "literal hollowness" of *Blo-Puff*. It is a form of concealment with intent to tantalize so that the viewer is obliged to make an imaginative inference of some kind in order to rationalize the appearance of the object, just like hair requires the imaginative inference of an underlying scalp or animal.

In all cases, the interest here is in exploring various types of hollowness, and finding out whether those various types have consequences for the exact kind of "secret inner life" that the object might be leading. With the increase in formal specificity beyond literalist art, balloon animals open a range of possible life-effects.

WHY?

It is worth reiterating the opening question with a slightly different inflection. What are balloon animals doing here, in architecture? If it is now possible to understand balloon animals as an attempt to construct inanimate subjects, what are the consequences of these inanimate subjects for our discipline? For a generation of architects who emphasize novel form and design, balloon animals are a way to evade two established models of practice that do not look very appealing. First, Balloon animals require close attention to form but do necessitate the models of audience effects that have been associated with the serious design of form to this point, like the connoisseurship required for difficult reading or the dislocation of self required by estrangement -- both of which are tantamount, from an audience point of view, to intellection by prolonged staring. Second, balloon animals promote real action on the part of an audience without requiring architects to sacrifice form for a sociological agenda that abandons serious design in favor of adopting the language (if not the substance) of anti-capitalist politics.

How do balloon animals differ in practice from other formalist work? We see it in the fit between adjacent balloon animals, and in the fit between balloon animals and people. There are no designated "fitting parts" here, only the press of only body against another, hand to belly, belly to protuberance, lump to head, etc. There are no significant distinctions between the three fits that conjoin animate and inanimate objects: person-to-person is much the same as person-to-balloon animal is much the same as balloon animal to balloon animal. The effect is to flatten all things to a single plane of interaction -- both animate and inanimate. It is a first move toward a *world of total audience*.

ENDNOTES

1. Fried, Michael. "Art and Objecthood." In *Art and Objecthood, Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Page 160.
2. Fried, 42.
3. Fried, 41.
4. Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. New York: Penguin, 1985.
5. Fried, 156.
6. Fried, 166.
7. Fried, 163.
8. Fried, 155.
9. Fried, 150. In this passage Fried is quoting Donald Judd's evaluation of Anthony Caro's sculpture as anthropomorphic.